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The Transfigured Phenomena of Domesticity in the Urban Interior

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconsiders a refurbished London street, Bermondsey Street, as an interior where objects of memories are curated into a reconstructed atmosphere of domesticity. The study argues that as our experience of the city becomes increasingly transient, the notion of inhabiting shifts to a wider and more fragmented context, and our ability to integrate with the urban environment becomes eroded. Bermondsey Street, however, presents a distinctive experience where the phenomena of intimacy and familiarity converge across space and time to provide a more stable form of inhabitation. In order to understand how these phenomena occur and how the experience of the urban interior manifests itself in our consciousness, the study follows the Husserlian phenomenological method of intentionality whereby the urban interior of Bermondsey Street becomes the intentional object. It also places the reflective gaze of the phenomenologist in 'epoché', a phenomenological method of reduction that suspends normality. In doing so, the phenomenologist is able to access the points of reference that reveal the affective qualities of the intentional object in our consciousness. While the discursive and theoretical content of the study is expressed in the body of text, the phenomenological narrative is bracketed and illustrated as a meditative journey; a recollection of memories of the homely, initiated by the encounter between consciousness and the way the interior animates imagination. Thus, in 'epoché', the reflective gaze of the phenomenologist transcends normality to reveal the underlying structure of the phenomena and the intentionality of the subjective experience.

TRANSIENT INHABITATION

The city is a dynamic living organism, constantly changing and evolving. 'Growth is the continual condition of the city,'¹ remarks historian Peter Ackroyd, and in contemporary London there are places where the old and the new coexist in complete contrast to each other; while in other parts of the city, building developments have erased all traces of past inhabitation, familiar points of reference, and altered the urban landscape beyond recognition. In recent years the rising cost of living has also forced many people to move further away from the city centre and commute each day. Such conditions create a situation where people's experience of the city becomes transient and composed of short bursts of 'instantaneous experiences', which, explains architectural historian Charles Rice, contribute to 'the dynamic energy of the modern city'.² However, the downside is that the flow of experiential energy that permeates the city also becomes fragmented, which not only affects the way we relate to the material world but also to the perceived world, and the way the urban atmosphere resonates with our senses. Christian Borch, political sociologist, explains that

'atmospheres affect us, change our moods, and influence our behaviours, and these effects may be produced without us consciously recognising them.'³ Thus, the instability of rapid change and transient experiences impairs our ability to, in consciousness, cultivate meaningful connections with our surroundings and their embodied atmosphere.

Furthermore, the impermanence of the situation creates a shift in the meaning and experience of inhabitation. Once, inhabiting related to a specific and perhaps even permanent location, often the home and its immediate community. Now, it encompasses a plurality of situations. We may inhabit the place where we work and another where we socialise. We may also, for a while each day, inhabit the transition spaces we use to commute, since a great number of people reside outside the boundaries of the city. In each situation, we are only temporarily part of a community and because the experience is short-lived, our sense of belonging may then become eroded. As the notion of inhabiting becomes impermanent, the relationship between body and space, primarily determined by partial experiences, becomes less stable. This, urban planner and designer Ali Madanipour points out, contravenes the necessity for us, as human beings for whom the relationship between private and public starts with the body and 'the inner space of our consciousness',⁴ to 'draw boundaries as part of our need for wellbeing'.⁵

Challenged by the transience of the situation, we constantly need to redraw boundaries. So, with diminished opportunities for the body to connect to the familiar points of reference that enable us to feel grounded in our self-identity, we are then less able to make a clear distinction between private and public, and our sense of continuity weakens. Therefore it becomes increasingly important for the urban environment to foster the sense of place and belonging that underpins our need for psychological and emotional stability. One way of doing this is to embrace the distinctiveness of local phenomena and, following Madanipour's argument for locating the individual in social space, for the transient population to take some degree of ownership of its surroundings, 'enabling the individual to develop a sense of identity and engage in the rituals of communication and recognition'.⁶

THE URBAN INTERIOR

London has, until now, resisted homogeneity and may still offer unique and distinctive experiences to the transient inhabitant. Often considered and represented as a single entity, the city is, in reality, experienced as a network of constituent parts, nested against each other and infused with a recognisable identity and idiosyncrasies whose meanings, familiarity and recognition generate a distinct sense of place. Soho, Brick Lane, Liverpool Street, Canary Wharf, London Bridge. Each name conjures up unique places and experiences in the minds of Londoners. A rich palette of phenomena, experienced gradually as we move through the urban environment, brings forth a surprising variety of situations, which, woven into a cluster of spatial experiences, embody and project the values, beliefs and dreams of the city's inhabitants. As phenomena permeate

our consciousness, body and mind become immersed in the singularity of each experience to initiate a feeling of 'insideness', a condition of interiority within the subjectivity of the inner self. So the sensation of being inside permeates our consciousness through the agency of the immersive and affective qualities of the city's constituent parts.

As such, it animates imagination and impacts on our fundamental ability to perceive our location in the world in relation to other places outside the locus of perception of the body. So, Madanipour tells us, 'the body mediates between the states of consciousness and the world'.⁷ This occurs quite naturally when we are inside the private interior of our home, where, following Madanipour's metaphor on the perceived layers of privacy, we 'can be seen to be situated at the core of a multi-layered shell, surrounded by an onion-shaped structure of layers of protection'.⁸ We are not only conscious of the room we are in but also of other rooms around it, of the street nearby, the road beyond, the area where the house is located and the city around it. In imagination, the interior transcends traditional walled boundaries and, as the notion of interiority is transposed to the streets of the city, urban interiors become connected to each other 'not through spatial continuity or visual transparency but through meaningful, psychologically effective transitions'⁹ embodied by actual and perceived thresholds, or, for sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, objective and subjective boundaries.¹⁰ Accordingly, even when the city appears to be whole, it is experienced as a series of nested interiors.

Thus, in the midst of London's ancient interior, in the Borough of Southwark, lies Bermondsey Street. As one of the city's original nested interiors, the location is significant. History recalls that the area was home to the leather industries from the Middle Ages up until the nineteenth century, and streets with names such as Tanner Street and Leathermarket Street still exist today. Then, its proximity to the River Thames made it an ideal location to store and process food arriving by ships in the docks nearby. People, however, didn't just work there; it was also for many a place of dwelling, a home. Bermondsey Street became designated as a conservation area in 1972¹¹ in order to preserve and enhance its

character and appearance. However, beyond the desire to save some of London's heritage from destruction, the conservation of Bermondsey Street is an intriguing example of an urban situation where the preservation of the past is united with contemporary lived experiences.

Today, it is occupied by creative agencies, crafts showrooms, art galleries, restaurants and specialist boutiques all bearing the qualities of the local environment. Architecturally, while its remaining nineteenth and twentieth century warehouses have been carefully restored to safeguard its more recent heritage and retain aspects of what Ackroyd judiciously describes as its 'indigenous or native spirit',¹² new additions favour a style of contemporary design that embodies a desire towards a symbiotic relationship between past and present. So the street was refurbished to preserve some of its original features while newer buildings complement existing ones. Two iconic buildings stand out. The Museum of Fashion, whose bold exterior rendered in bright orange and pink brings an injection of energy into the street, and the White Cube Gallery, where contemporary art meets the architectural narrative of Modernism. Although noticeably different in style, they are nonetheless sensitive to the site's heritage, more specifically its materiality and the intimacy of the setting. So the architecture contributes to Bermondsey Street's unique atmospheric character and identity.

Bermondsey Street is also instilled with a distinct sense of interiority. Naturally, the way buildings frame the street meets the notion of enclosure we expect in an interior. However, its spatial layout also incorporates a highly unusual feature; the sense of interiority that permeates consciousness is further enhanced by a distinctive threshold. Swiss architect Peter Zumthor speaks of the threshold as a 'transition between the inside and the outside, an incredible sense of place, an unbelievable feeling of concentration when we suddenly become aware of being enclosed, of something enveloping us, keeping us together, holding us...'¹³ From the city centre, the street is accessible via a tunnel underneath a railway bridge. It is deep and cavernous; it takes a few minutes to walk through it. Lined with uniformed bricks weathered by age and blackened by

years of traffic pollution, it is almost featureless, yet unsettling. The space envelops, sounds are contained, and time seems to stand still. The sensation of enclosure is almost overwhelming. The tunnel provides an immersive experience that forces the mind to surrender from one scale of perception to another. On one side lies the exterior, the city with its fast-moving pace and tall buildings, while on the other lies the interior of Bermondsey Street, where the space around the body becomes narrower, the buildings lower, the traffic slower, the textures more noticeable and the colours warmer. So in the time it takes to walk through the tunnel, the effect of its immersive qualities disconnects the mind from the outside, which in turn, intensifies the experience of the encounter with the interior.

The singularity and temporality of the threshold provide a perceptual stage for the street to reveal itself in its most intimate setting. Beyond the architectural notion of scale, Zumthor explains that levels of intimacy become connected with proximity and distance¹⁴ and so, the interior connects with the body. The effect of spatial and perceptual relationships in the intimate interior of Bermondsey Street is almost immediate, and the inner space of the body harmonises seamlessly into this new environment while experiencing phenomena that bring forth an acute sense of place. Intuitively, we feel a sense of belonging, of familiarity and comfort. It is therefore by enquiring into the essence of these phenomena that it becomes possible to grasp the structure of experiences in the urban interior and articulate the qualities that enable our most intimate space, the inner self, to integrate with this interior.

IN EPOCHÉ

In order to enquire into the essence of the phenomena the study turns specifically to the phenomenological methods of intentionality and reduction developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl at the start of the twentieth century. Following the Husserlian tradition of phenomenological enquiry, intentionality means that the experience is 'about' or 'of' something and, here, the urban interior of Bermondsey Street becomes the intentional object. The experience is

about the urban interior of Bermondsey Street. What's more, in order to elucidate the nature of the intentional object, we need to enquire back into consciousness through the method of phenomenological reduction whereby the attention shifts from objective causality to the subjectivity of the experience, from the 'what' to the 'how'. To do this Husserl places the flow of experience in 'epoché', a form of suspension or bracketing of normality, of 'beliefs, judgments, opinions and theories', which 'does not mean to doubt, but simply to set the judgment aside'.¹⁵ Husserl explains what occurs when, as a phenomenologist, he places himself in 'epoché':

When I perform the reduction, I no longer attend to the worldly objects of my experience, nor do I wonder about the causal underpinnings of that experience; instead I focus my attention on the experience of those worldly objects. I pay attention to the presentation of the world around me (and myself), rather than to what is presented.¹⁶

Hence, within the mode of objective thoughts, what Husserl calls the natural attitude,¹⁷ the site of this study would simply be described as a street lined with buildings, shops, offices and restaurants. It would be noted that its cobbled stones, alleyways and brick warehouses are reminiscent of a recent historical past while the warmth of the colours and the weathering of the materials bring forth a sensation of mellowness. This alone is sufficient to understand that the street feels comfortable and familiar but the objectivity of the natural attitude cannot reveal the underlying structure of the phenomena. It cannot elucidate how it is that it feels that way or reveal the way in which it manifests itself in the depth of consciousness. Outside phenomenological reduction, the natural attitude can only provide clues towards the causes of the phenomena.

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard also takes a similar position when he says that:

[I]t is not a question of describing houses, or enumerating their picturesque features and analyzing for which reasons they are comfortable. On the contrary, we must go

beyond the problems of description — whether this description be objective or subjective, that is whether it gives facts or impressions — in order to attain to the primary virtues, those that reveal an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of inhabiting.¹⁸

Therefore, to access the depth of consciousness and the 'subjectivity that roots the whole structure of objectivity in our everyday experiences,'¹⁹ we need to liberate the mind from assumptions that occur as a result of objective knowledge. By placing the mind in 'epoché' during the phenomenological journey we endeavour to move away from objective knowledge and preconceptions to enquire into the essence of the experience, to transcend the causality of appearances and elucidate the subjective qualities of the intentional object. By enquiring into the 'how' rather than the 'what', the mind enters a dreamlike state and enables us to reach into consciousness. Thus, the inner self perceives suggestions embodied by objects in the interior to produce what philosopher Shaun Gallagher calls 'primary impression',²⁰ understood here as an immediate connection between the flow of consciousness and memories. Husserl illustrates the sequence of primary impressions through the concepts of retention and protention. Retention 'provides us with a consciousness of the just-elapsed phase of the enduring object' while protention 'anticipates something which is about to be experienced'.²¹ It is only within this meditative flow²² that we are able to suspend normality and conjure up images to, in this subjective realm, transcend assumptions, access intimate gestures and reveal the phenomenological narrative of the experienced interior.

And so the phenomenological journey begins...



The intentionality of the entrance into Bermondsey Street.

[... emerging through the threshold, the contrast between the enclosure of the corridor and the bright interior of the entrance creates a sensation of space enhanced by a wall of mirrors on one side. The body seems to integrate with the environment as the reflections follow its movements. The composition of warm tones, tactile textures and smooth surfaces bring a light and welcoming feel to the interior. It is designed for the body. The pace slows down on the textured floor. The stillness of the atmosphere suggests repose. The interior provides shelter from the outside world...]



The intentionality of tactile qualities.

[... a line of sight towards a dining room leads to a large timber panel whose golden tones and tactile qualities revealed by the passage of time wrap the eyes with a sensation of comfort. Like a picture on a wall with a story to tell, it inspires a pause...]



The intentionality of a dining terrace.

[... a translucent material filters the light coming into the dining room into a beautiful glow that highlights the mellow tones of the wall surfaces. As when a bright summer light penetrates into the sheltered interior through half-opened blinds, the atmosphere is warm and inviting. Although currently empty, a cheerful display of seats echoes the chatter of people enjoying a meal around the dinner table. The tone is convivial. The meal is eaten slowly, taking time to enjoy the many flavours of the food, each course accompanied by animated conversations and laughter...]



The intentionality of weathered surfaces.

[... materials bearing the patina of time reveal the textures of the repetition of daily gestures. They act as a reminder of the many lives of the interior. Lines and familiar scars inscribed across their surfaces become visible mementos of moments that have been lived but are not always remembered. Some endure, like the time when the corner of a table being precariously carried across the room made a deep cut into one of the doors. Others are habitual, like the encounter between the cat's claws and an irresistible table leg as a prelude to each meal...]



The intentionality of daily rituals.

[... near a side door and into a small room, people are performing the rituals of daily activities. Cleaning, storing, making, moving, fetching, resting, daydreaming, the domestic scenography of the interior...]



The intentionality of a tiled floor.

[... two steps up onto the chequered kitchen floor. A mouth-watering smell of food emanates from the interior while, in the background, a radio plays a lively tune...]



The intentionality of furniture.

[... 8 am, coffee, toasts grilled in the oven, often forgotten and burnt. The sound of the burnt surface being scraped into the sink with a knife, the familiar acrid smell. 1 pm, the sound of plates and cutlery indicates that lunch is about to be served. 4 pm, the children are back from school. Hot chocolate, bread, butter and a prized bar of dark chocolate nested inside the bread. 8 pm, dinner is served...]



The intentionality of a display window.

[... in a glass cabinet, an incongruous display of objects showcases a cherished collection: bottles of various sizes and colours, an old radio, kitchen scales and a few enamelled teapots. Old-fashioned commodities frozen in time and sealed behind glass. There was a time when they were useful. Weighing flour to bake a birthday cake, singing in tune with the music playing on the radio, pouring the cat's milk into the small enamelled dish...]



The intentionality of a fireplace.

[... the glimpse of a fireplace. The glow of the fire warming up skin and spirit in winter. Coming home from the cold, removing boots, coat, scarf and gloves in the cool vestibule, almost rushing in anticipation of the warmth of the living room. The crackling sound of the fire. Finding just the right place where the hands warm up without being too hot. Turning the body for the other side to warm up too...]



The intentionality of a window bracket.

[... a bookshelf; Words, images, stories, history, reflections. Portals into other worlds. A long pause. So many afternoons spent reading in this favourite cosy corner of the living room, sitting comfortably and untroubled in the snug armchair, its leather cracked and distorted through successive years of use...]



The intentionality of the small table outside a shop.

[... further back, a small conservatory overlooks the garden. With just enough space for a table, a couple of chairs and a few plants, this cosy corner of the house becomes a suntrap where, through semi-closed eyes, daydreams merge with reality. At dusk, the layered reflections of objects and furniture are multiplied across glass surfaces, ghost-like figures, neither inside nor outside...]



The intentionality of recessed doorways.

[... the bedroom door, slightly recessed from the landing. Going up the stairs, the feel of the latch of the door already in hand. It must be opened ever so slowly so as not to creak and wake everyone up. Inside all is quiet and peaceful, the glow of the bedside table lamp acts as a reassuring friend. The most private space, a place to dream...]



The intentionality of a dark and narrow corridor.

[... feeling the textured walls in the darkness of the narrow corridor, climbing the familiar final steps while carefully placing the feet on the only spots that do not creak. The attic, with its pungent smell of dust, full of lost treasures hidden in nooks and crannies, invites imagination and exploration...]

COLLECTION AND [RE]COLLECTIONS

The visible world reaches us through multi-sensory perceptions and so visual experiences contribute to what Bachelard refers to as 'the polyphony of the senses' whereby the 'eye collaborates with the body and other senses'²³ for our perceptual memories to enable us to use the eyes to touch, smell, hear and taste; to grasp notions of depth, kinaesthesia and time. So as the reflective gaze of the phenomenologist focuses its attention on the interior of Bermondsey Street, images of experiences begin to emerge within the inner space of consciousness. In 'epoché', the inner-self is able to perceive its surroundings with renewed wonder and reach into the depth of consciousness for imagination to cross the threshold of perceptual memories. In this instance, imagination doesn't relate to the fictional but becomes the channel through which memories are able to resurface. The phenomenological journey through the interior becomes a gradual recollection of moments of lived experiences made visible again within the inner space of the self through the encounter between consciousness and the intentional object. So here we are not dealing with historical memory as such, that found in what historian Pierre Nora refers to as spaces of memory (*lieux de mémoire*),²⁴ but about how reflexive memories from the subjective world govern objectivity as they emerge through the intentionality of worldly objects. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur explains that the difference between memory and memories is made more explicit in the French language by the use of two different words. 'In this sense a distinction must be made in language between memory (*la mémoire*) as intention and memories (*les souvenirs*) as the thing intended.'²⁵ When, like Madanipour, we consider the body as the 'inner space of subjectivity as well as the psychological-physical space which is body's extension to its immediate surroundings',²⁶ the location of the self in the world is then embedded in the process of reduction, with the body being the locus of experiences and consciousness that of memories. So here, when placed in 'epoché', the mind brings forth objectively inaccessible images of everyday experiences that progressively reveal the phenomena as they appear in the consciousness of the subjective self.

Accordingly, the collection of objects reveals the urban interior of Bermondsey Street for the imagination of the phenomenologist to conjure up images of domesticity, conforming to Bachelard's view that 'imagination augments the values of reality'.²⁷ Experiencing the interior in 'epoché' as a sequence of phenomenological encounters, the phenomenologist is able to grasp its intentionality and thus, elucidate how the interior resonates with familiarity and comfort. The collection of objects becomes a symbol of continuity and stability for the transient inhabitant, one that bears the essence of the homely, where the domain of the private initiates memories of lived experiences. Accordingly, as in a domestic interior where, academic Tiiu Poldma explains, we 'develop meanings attached to objects and environments',²⁸ the coherence of the collection throughout the interior indicates that it is curated to reflect the values, beliefs and dreams of its inhabitants. So the curation signals that a selection process has taken place, perhaps in order to present an idealised view of domesticity since, like the architecture of the refurbished interior,

the collection embodies a desire towards a symbiotic relationship between past and present. The collected objects of memories on display do not therefore need to represent authentic memories of the present-day inhabitants. Instead, the collection intentionally appropriates and repositions selected memories to reinstate them into the present where they converge with contemporary values. The curated environment presents what sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel describes as a 'discursive production of a continuous biography [which] consists of playing up those elements of our past that are consistent with (or can somewhat be construed as prefiguring) our present identity while downplaying those who are incongruous with it.'²⁹ So, to borrow a term used by Bachelard, the collection is imbued with oneiric qualities whose intentionality is evocative of a domestic environment where traces of memories from lived and imagined past inhabitation merge with the present.

TRANSFIGURED DOMESTICITY

In contemporary urban interiors, our sense of belonging fluctuates when weakened points of reference, resulting from a fast pace of change, erode our ability to identify with our surroundings, assign meanings and establish a sense of place. In addition, transient and fragmented patterns of inhabitation continually shift established boundaries, destabilising notions of continuity essential to our wellbeing. The urban interior of Bermondsey Street, however, provides a unique experience, one that sustains meaningful public-private relationships to support transient inhabitation. In this instance, the interior embraces the distinctiveness of its local phenomena, which, explains philosopher Gernot Böhme, brings the dimension of historical depth necessary for its inhabitants to feel sheltered and at home.³⁰ The interior presents a delicate balance between a curated past, referencing the private domain of domesticity, and contemporary experiences, referencing life in the public domain. Thus, even though the images that emerge from the consciousness of the phenomenologist remain subjective and dependent on personal recollections, the intentionality of the collection is to display homely qualities that can be grasped by anyone. Rice links this phenomenon to the notion of involuntary memories (*mémoires involontaires*), which occur in our consciousness through sensory polyphonies:

The interior then works not as the space ensuring the coherence of classification, but as the space for the registering of traces, providing the surface against which the qualities of specific objects, which constantly have the potential to open the collection beyond conscious orderliness, might be preserved. [...] What is interesting here in terms of the collection is the shift from object as the prime focus of thought, to the effect of objects for the inhabitant as collector.³¹

Thus, the seemingly objective collection generates subjective recollections; collection and [re] collection permeate the interior. This explains why the urban interior of Bermondsey Street feels intuitively comfortable and familiar within the world of objectivity.

The purpose of the phenomenological enquiry then serves to elucidate how this is governed by the subjective world. Through the collection, the interior incorporates points of reference that present engaging opportunities for phenomena experienced across space and time, as well as clear boundaries, and a continuity that enables the inner self to authenticate through interaction with the space. The phenomena belong to a domain Rice calls 'long experience', 'founded on an appeal and a connection to tradition, and the accumulation of wisdom over time [...] its refuge and its context for amplification, is the domestic interior.'³² Therefore, as the environment is constructed through distinctive phenomena of domesticity and time becomes 'spatialised', we experience continuity, while a sense of permanence and stability permeates the urban interior. The resulting narrative aspires towards what Rice refers to as 'an interior of unproductivity [...] needed to counter the rationalization of the metropolis',³³ in this instance, where the experience of inhabiting becomes bound to the original notion of shelter as when Bachelard speaks of the home as a place for dreaming.³⁴ The urban interior becomes an intentional perceptual map 'inscribed by domestic comfort',³⁵ which brings forth an innate sense of belonging. Familiarity and intimacy converge across space and time for the reconstructed atmosphere of domesticity to empower its inhabitants to feel grounded in their self-identity, and so to feel at home.

NOTES

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6. Ibid., 34.
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14. Ibid., 49.
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21. Ibid.
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26. Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City*, 6.
27. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 3.
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31. Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior. Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*, 15-17.
32. Ibid., 11.
33. Ibid., 96.
34. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 5-6.
35. Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior. Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*, 75.

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